



Kaufmann House

designed by Richard Neutra at one time shows the combination of documentation, story-telling and creative expression. Palm Springs, California, 1947, Julius Shulman

© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10)

the document, the story and the expression

Cameron Campbell

Iowa State University, Department of Architecture, cameronc@iastate.edu

Architectural photography is a way of seeing and understanding architecture as well as a way to generate and critique design. Eric de Maré separates the general types of architectural photography into three categories: "The Record, the Illustration and the Picture". However, a better way to describe these categories is the Document, the Story and the Expression because these terms can guide how architectural photography responds to the production of architecture as well as the mode of expression of architecture in different ways. By distinguishing the categories it becomes clear the many ways that architecture can be communicated through photography. The technical considerations of architectural photography are linked directly with creative expression and are used together to tell the story. Architectural photography is far more complex than simply showing a building but is often mistaken to be just that. The act of translating an experience of three-dimensional space into the two-dimensions of photography is a process of careful and creative thought. This paper expands these three categories as a way to understand the dynamics and possibilities of this form of media.

keywords Shulman, de Maré, Document, Story, Expression

Architectural photographers are storytellers. A well-written story has evidence, a plotline, and is embellished with creative material to peak the reader's interest and carry the evidence through the plotline. Books that contain only facts are as one-dimensional as books that contain no facts at all. The constant struggle in architectural photography is finding the right balance of documentation, description and creativity. The architectural photographer is challenged to create what the audience considers to be honest and true architecture. However, within honesty is a contradiction –is a perfectly illuminated scene from an impossible location accurate to reality, or is this false reality far more compelling and honest to the idea and translation of the architecture? There is no simple answer since photography transcends fact and fiction. Architectural photography is often many images used together in concert to show, to tell, and to engage the audience.

Architectural photography has been considered a lesser form of art and categorized as a form of commercial art². However, a careful examination of the wide range of considerations that an architectural photographer must address shows that it is a very rich and complicated art form. Architectural photography is a way of seeing and understanding architecture as well as a way to generate and critique design. Eric de Maré separates the general types of architectural photography into three categories: "The Record, the Illustration and the Picture"³. In this paper these terms have been renamed to "The Document, The Story and The Expression" because these terms more accurately describe how architectural photography responds to the production of architecture as well as the mode of expression of architecture in different ways.

The issue of honesty in the photograph is a fundamental concern that impacts any image made. A recent article in *Architectural Record* questioned the "doctoring" of architectural photos. The article records the collision of technological capability with communicating the idea of the architecture unimpeded by the reality of the situation. In this article, the author challenges the ethical limitations of altering an image. The competition among firms for awards and recognition push them to have the most dynamic and remarkable images of their work possible and drive the architects to push the envelope for how and to what degree an image may be manipulated. When a city planner adds a telephone pole in an unflattering location or a mechanical subcontractor adds chillers to the top of the building, the condition of the architecture may change and have negative consequences to the design.

The question that arises from this is about the honesty of communication if absolutely anything is altered in these cases. However, it is not that simple as photography is a subjective art –where one chooses to stand, which lens, and what time of day are but a few of the contributing factors in making an image. One can argue that every photograph is altered in some way. Simply overexposing is a type of altering in order to generate the most compelling image since space feels more open when it is brighter. As it applies to architectural photography, one must be careful to only consider the physical scene and bear in mind the three types –the document, the expression and the story– each requiring honesty and accuracy to matters beyond the physical.

the document

Architectural photography can be understood and used to document for posterity a particular condition, building, or place. It is useful for reflecting on how a condition was and what has happened. This is useful for historic preservation, as well as future reflection. Richard Pare outlines the work by government surveyors to the work of early masters of photography in his book *Photography and Architecture 1839-1939*⁴. Here we see the

the document, the story and the expression

long history of documentation and the value of precise photography. As the technology of film and the quality of lenses improved, the photographic instrument's accuracy of reproduction was without competition. Phyllis Lambert states that the "[r]apidity of notation and accuracy of representation"⁵ was a direct translation from the sketching done when architects went on the "Grand Tour" before photography to how the buildings were photographed immediately after the proliferation of photography. The intent was to capture the detail and reproduce it when one would return home. Cervin Robinson related the early photographer's background as a draftsman or as an illustrator to help prepare photographers to represent in this way⁶. Considered only from this perspective, photographers of architecture were masterful at reproducing accurately.

Typical to this mode of communication is the use of elevations, standard overall three-quarter photos for interior and exterior photography as well as aerial photography in recent history. In this case the analysis is applied to making an image that is accurate and taken from a neutral position about the work. Ideal lighting is important and sometimes the ideal light is indirect. It is the "what" of the matter –what it is, what it is made of and so on.

The "axial" image or true elevation is a key vantage point for this mode of expression. In drawing terms, this is the photographic equivalent of the elevation drawing. The benefit of the axial image is that the true proportions of the architecture can be expressed with limited distortions from perspective. The shifting of the lens to be parallel to the film plane allows the view to remain perfectly aligned with the building façade. Modern small format cameras have parallel correction lenses that do the same thing. However, it is important to note that there is always distortion from perspective. A canopy projecting away from the building and closer to the camera will render larger than the background. That is why the more telephoto the lens, and the farther the camera position is from the subject, the less distortion.

The aerial view has a long tradition for documenting the relationship of the building with context. Early in photography, this was done from high buildings and as the speed of film (and development of transportation) increased so did the height –as photographers could photograph from planes. In contemporary practice, drones offer new opportunities to document a building from above as well as Google Maps and other satellite imagery.

How people, furniture and other moving elements are used in this mode of representation is a matter of fashion and what is being communicated. On one hand, the photograph without people is less distracting. However, how people use space could help document the scene. There are numerous examples of this from both perspectives, but it is worth noting that since the mid twentieth century the fashion has shifted back and forth between showing people and having the space be empty. High dynamic range (HDR) is another debatable topic when it comes to digital technology and documentation. HDR can bring detail out of highlights and shadows, but requires software manipulation.

Documentation has a direct tie to honesty and some of the concerns outlined previously. Here, one might argue, is the first challenge to honesty. A parallel correction lens is true to how we perceive architecture in our brain, but in reality we look up at a tall building and the lines converge. Flying in a plane overhead will be a vantage point that an inhabitant would never experience. Furniture is never perfectly positioned. Even processing the image such that every detail can be visible is not a reality. Each "truth" is one set forth to communicate a crucial aspect of architecture –perhaps at the expense of another truth.

the illustration

The illustration is way of telling the story about the architecture and is probably the most common form of architectural photography. While it is similar to the document with the use of elevations, axial conditions or overall three-quarter shots, the image goes beyond recording the content. The most controlled and precise photo is the most telling about organization and relationships. The illustration requires careful set up of the composition as well as the elements in the space such as furniture, people, lighting and other unfixed objects in the scene (Cover image). Telling the story of the design is an interpretive exercise that requires understanding the architecture and manipulating the variables to best communicate how or why a building is used.

Parallel correction lenses, so-called PC lenses, can be used in the document to make sure the film plane is parallel to the building elevation to create a “true” elevation, but in the illustration, the photographer might “shift into” a condition to illustrate a relationship. In other words, the capability of the lens is used creatively to illustrate a condition of the architecture.

People, lights, trees, cars, and etc. help to organize a space and describe how it is used as a document. However in the illustration, this is not a passive act. Sometimes how people function in an environment happens naturally, sometimes this is staged along with the movement of furniture in order to best describe a condition or to enhance the condition to its most extreme situation. A great example of this is a hospital. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) laws prevent a photographer from showing patients or caregivers in a healthcare environment, so models are often used to give scale, activate, and illustrate the use of space. Lighting and the time of day have a strong impact in the experience of space. A particular highlight in a space from the sun may only happen for 5 minutes on a given day, but if captured in the photo, it lasts forever. All of these things –cars, trees, furniture and other things that move and change can be manipulated in short term to show immediate change or long term as photographers can wait entire seasons for autumn colors to enhance the building environment.

The story, however, goes deeper than the way to show space. Here the architectural photographer develops a relationship with the architect and or the owner. Through this connection a deeper understanding is developed that allows the story to unfold. Research into the archives at the Getty of the famed architectural photographer, Julius Shulman, shows his deep understanding of the people and the places he photographed. He would write captions for images and even wrote books about the projects he photographed –showing his deeper understanding and appreciation of the work. Indeed he cared about the work he photographed and was able to talk very eloquently about the work that he engaged. In one passage he wrote about what he photographed, “The house was then enclosed with rough-sawn cedar planking and double glass with careful attention being given to vistas from all openings (f1)”.

The illustration is presumed to be honest to the story. However, it should not be overlooked that these techniques can also be abused to illustrate something that doesn't happen or to exaggerate an idea that may work conceptually, but not in practice. What then is the role and responsibility of the architectural photographer?

the expression

Finally the expression is what is most romantically understood to be architectural photography because these images tend to evoke an emotional response by the viewer. Common to this way of producing the image are unique views, dynamic angles, and extreme conditions (f2). These images are used to communicate the temporality and experiential nature of the architecture.



f1_Crites House

designed by Crites and McConnell, shows the vistas from all openings. Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1964, Julius Shulman
© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10)

Here organization is not always clear. In fact usually the image is abstracted in order to displace the viewer from the photographer's vantage point and focus on the experience, a particular relationship, the formal expression, or the texture of the condition. Sometimes to express is to find the unique camera position. Perhaps this is because any photo produced in easily accessible space and from eye-level appears normal or pedestrian. A more powerful expression can be achieved by seeing the familiar in an unfamiliar way. It requires the viewer to enter into the image, to figure out and analyze a given situation and then to capture that observation on film.

Expression should not be burdened by honesty, because it is interpretive, but it is showing something physical, something real. High Dynamic Range (HDR) and focus stacking are digital tools used to replicate in a still image the way the eye-brain stitches information together. These tools can also be used to exaggerate the perception for impact. Thus becoming hyper-real.

cameron campbell



f2. Kaufmann House

designed by Richard Neutra, is from a vantage point that one would typically not occupy. The unique vantage point combined with the dramatic lighting creates interest. Palm Springs, California, 1947, Julius Shulman
© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10)

the combination of modes

Just as there is no clean delineation between the document and the illustration, the illustration and the expression or even the document and the expression, it is possible to combine the modes into a single photograph and many of the most memorable images do just that. The image of the Neutra-designed Kaufmann house (Cover image) is a great example of this. It is not simply a document, however it relates an axial view with context in a documentation way. It tells a story of how the spaces are used by showing relationships. Finally, it is a rich expression because of how the image is made: by waiting for the exact timing and lighting condition the layers of mountains are recorded, lighting in the bedroom (which was added artificially) draws our eye inward and reinforces the figure-ground, and even the lady of the house in repose beside the pool simultaneously tells a story and richly expresses the experience.

The case 22 house overlooking Los Angeles (f3) is another wonderful example of this and is one of Shulman's most popular images. It is an extremely dramatic image because of the dusk condition that allows the interior light to be the primary source of light and the street lights of the city grid in the distance to be perceptible, yet the image also communicates the story of why the house hangs off the cliff in order to achieve this view and add suspense to the experience. Finally, as a document, the image shows the detailing and construction used in making the architecture. There is a blurry line between these designations of the document, the story, and the expression, but the designations serve to inform the thought process in conveying architecture through the two-dimensional medium of photography.

All of the modes of communication in architectural photography are used in concert to describe and critique architecture through the photographic medium. Photographers are sometimes considered neutral because they act as a third party, as an interpreter, but they are never neutral. Every choice, even the small choices, has an impact on the image. Furthermore, the post-production process is a subjective process as well, and many more decisions are made to influence the final product –from dust removal, to color correction. All three categories could be challenged about honesty– ironically, even the document, in its goal for clarity can be a victim of manipulation. The accuracy of translating an experience or an idea must be matched to the mode in which the architectural photographer engages the work. While all modes may exist in an exceptional image, the grouping of images may also track over many modes.

Editing happens before the images are made, photographers are editing the idea, selecting conditions, ruling out alternative views. This process is the first level critique of architecture and the camera is a critiquing instrument. The modes of expression are constantly part of the internal dialog the photographer has with the subject, and sometimes it is an external dialog with the architect, owner or occupant. The discussion may result in a better understanding of the story of the architecture, perhaps the critical resolution of the detail, or even determining a crucial moment in the architecture.

The question raised at the beginning of this paper must be reconsidered in this context. Under one frame of reference, architectural photographers have been untruthful for many years simply by slightly changing the location of a chair in order to not be distracting in the image or overexposing in order to make a space feel lighter. This is a manipulation of the medium in order to convey an experience. However, from another frame of reference, moving furniture to fit in a perspective is far more honest to the scene, as perceived in the photo, than to be where it would normally be located and perceived in space. Truth is relative.



f3_Case Study 22 House

shows the dramatic relationship between the house and the Los Angeles city at dusk
Los Angeles, California, 1960, Julius Shulman

© J. Paul Getty Trust. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2004.R.10)

endnotes

1. Eric de Maré, *Photography and Architecture* (London, The Architectural Press, 1961), 25.
2. Richard Pare, *Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939*. (Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1982), 15.
3. Eric de Maré, *Photography and Architecture* (London, The Architectural Press, 1961), 25.
4. Richard Pare, *Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939*. (Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1982), 12-26.
5. Phyllis Lambert's introduction in Richard Pare, *Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939*. (Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1982), 7-11.
6. Cervin Robinson and Joel Herschman. *Architecture Transformed: A history of the Photography of Buildings from 1839 to the Present*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 4.

bibliography

- _Bricker, Eric. *Visual Acoustics: The Modernism of Julius Shulman* Arthouse Films; New Video Group, 2010.
- _De Maré, Eric. *Architectural Photography*. Bath: The Pitman Press, 1975.
- _De Maré, Eric. *Photography and Architecture*. London: The Architectural Press, 1961.
- _Kamin, Blair. *Doctored Photo Raises Questions About Ethics in Architecture Contests* http://www.architecturalrecord.com/external_headlines/story?region=ar&story_id=jdlH
- _Mitchell, William. *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.
- _Pare, Richard. *Photography and Architecture: 1839-1939*. Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1982.
- _Robinson, Cervin and Joel Herschman. *Architecture Transformed: A history of the Photography of Buildings from 1839 to the Present*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.
- _Schulman, Julius. *"Descriptive Data #3202"* Los Angeles: Getty Archives, 2004.
- _Shulman, Julius. *Photographing Architecture and Interiors*. New York: Whitney Library of Design 1962.

CV

Cameron Campbell. AIA, is a registered architect, a professor of architecture, associate dean of the College of Design at Iowa State University and an architectural photographer. He grew up with a camera in his hand and a darkroom in the basement. He studied and practiced architecture and assisted architectural photographers on many assignments before starting his career as faculty at Iowa State University. He enjoys doing architectural photography assignments as he gets to work with currently practicing architects and talk about contemporary issues facing architecture. Cameron teaches an architectural photography class that started as a workshop hosted by Julius Shulman.